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***'I get more in contact with my soul':***  
**Gang Disengagement, Desistance and the Role of Spirituality**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the links between gangs, masculinity, religion, spirituality and desistance from an international perspective. It presents insights from life history interviews conducted with a small sample of 17 male reforming gang members in Denmark who had become immersed in a holistic spiritual intervention programme that foregrounded meditation, yoga and dynamic breathing techniques. Engagement with the programme enabled the men to begin to perform broader versions of masculinity, experience improved mental health and wellbeing and develop a greater commitment to criminal desistance. Links with religious and spiritual engagement are discussed, and policy implications for the UK gang context included.

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**Keywords:** gangs, masculinity, desistance, spirituality, religion

## **Introduction**

British criminologists have often struggled with and contested the concept of the gang, focusing instead on youth formations and subcultures. However, building on earlier findings (Pitts, 2008), recent research has indicated that not only is the existence of street gangs a reality in many UK cities, but that gang life is evolving in some contexts (Densley, 2014; Densley et al., 2018; McLean, 2017). Densley (2014, p.22) highlights that recreation, crime, enterprise and governance represent ‘actualization stages through which gangs progress’ in London, and alludes to similar evolution processes emerging in cities like Manchester. Further, the work of McLean (2017) in Glasgow suggests that, while purely recreational-style violence and the traditional ‘cafeteria style’ offending associated with street gangs has somewhat diminished in the city, there has been an emergence of ‘speciality’ gangs that involve young men concentrating on drug sales and other forms of organised criminal activity (Densley et al., 2018).

In considering how best to support the gang disengagement and desistance process, some attention has recently been given to the role of masculine identity (re)construction as well as the potential inherent role of spirituality and religion in enabling this (Brenneman, 2012; Flores, 2014; Deuchar, 2018). Although interest in this is only now beginning to emerge within the context of UK gang intervention, in Scandinavian countries holistic forms of ascetic-spiritual interventions have been commonplace for some time (Deuchar, 2018).

The main focus of this paper is to explore and examine the relationship between masculinity, gang disengagement, desistance and spirituality through presenting empirical data arising from a small-scale qualitative study conducted in Denmark. The study explored the particular experiences and perspectives of a small sample of 17 male

Danish gang members who had become immersed in a holistic spiritual intervention programme that foregrounded the use of specific types of meditation, yoga and dynamic breathing techniques. Given that the particular techniques used are largely untried and untested in a UK context, the paper concludes by presenting some potential policy implications for supporting gang-related criminal desistance and preventing reoffending among men there.

Prior to outlining and presenting the empirical study, insights from the extent literature on masculinity, on religion and spirituality and the potential links with criminal desistance and gang disengagement are first presented.

## **Literature Review**

### **Masculinity, Gangs and Desistance**

It has been argued that crime (and particularly violent crime) can become a resource for some men to enact hegemonic forms of masculinity at certain stages of the life course and for particular reasons (Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity has been defined as the culturally idealized form of masculinity in a given historical and social setting. In contemporary western working-class urban communities, cherished hegemonic masculine characteristics typically include physical strength, competitiveness, rugged individualism, assertiveness and overt heterosexual behaviour combined with the rejection of femininity and weakness (Keddie 2003; Connell, 2005). In the context of the traditionally male-dominated world of gang membership, these characteristics are very often endorsed and promoted among young men against the backdrop of socially and economically disadvantaged contexts across the UK and the wider world (Densley, 2013; Deuchar, 2018).

Given the increasing recognition that masculinity identity construction plays an

influential role in gang activity and offending behaviour among men, in recent years gang scholars have come to examine attempts to re-define and reform masculinity among gang members (Brenneman, 2012; Flores, 2014). In a wider sense, criminologists have convincingly argued that criminal desistance is not just stimulated via transformations in offenders' circumstances or relationships, but also involves (inter-) subjective processes such as desisters' reconstructions of personal identities (Maruna 2001). It has been suggested by some that support from certain types of religious and spiritual intervention programmes may strengthen the natural processes that may push and pull male offenders away from gangs and generate the type of agentic behaviour that enables their gang-related masculine biographies to become gradually rewritten (Decker et al., 2014; Deuchar, 2018).

### **Religion, Criminal Offending and Desistance**

Religion has been described as a 'system of transcendent beliefs ... manifested in diverse practices, customs, denominational and institutional formations' (Whitehead 2013, p.1). It normally involves an organised entity with established rules, practices, beliefs and boundaries about a Higher Power to which individuals should adhere (Tanyi, 2006). Much scholarship has drawn upon control theory perspectives to argue that practising religion can provide offenders with a stake in conformity (Hirschi and Stark, 1969; Giordano et al. 2008; Schroeder and Frana 2009; Hallett and McCoy 2014). Functionalists have often claimed that religious beliefs provide a strong foundation for moral behaviour, thus enabling offenders to express remorse for previous activity. At the same time, they argue that religious engagement can help to prevent deviation from societal norms in the future (Clear and Sumter 2002; Jensen and Gibbons 2002; Stansfield et al., 2018).

In the case of male gang members, some suggest that engaging in religious practices can facilitate gang disengagement and desistance (see Johnson and Densley, 2018), both because religion serves as a credible ‘desistance signal’ to others (Densley and Pyrooz, 2017), and because it helps re-orientate masculine expression away from the street and engagement in criminal networks and onto conventional social, family and household roles (Flores, 2014). Giordano et al. (2008, p.102) also highlight that engagement in a religious community can be compatible with differential association theory and that religious practice can introduce offenders to strong social bonds and attachments to conventional others which can subsequently generate the social capital that supports gradual disengagement from crime (Hallett and McCoy 2014; Stansfield et al., 2018).

However, some scholars have remained sceptical about the potential of religion to inhibit offending (Clear and Sumter 2002). For instance, Giordano et al. (2008) draw attention to the claims emerging from several research studies that there is no apparent difference between religious and nonreligious youth in criminal offending. Others highlight that religious conversion is not the only way to cope with the shame and stigma of previous offending behaviour and imprisonment but that nonreligious conversion narratives – or ‘redemption scripts’ – can play an important role (Maruna, 2001, p.87). These are often characterised by offenders’ tendency to find meaning in their experiences of crime, a desire to ‘give something back’ to others, an increased sense of hope and control over their future and a desire to ‘make good’ from past wrongs (Maruna, 2001, p.87; see also Deuchar, 2018). Engagement in wider, more holistic spiritual practices within secular contexts may thus provide an additional stimulus for nurturing these narrative changes and redemption scripts (Maruna, 2001; Deuchar, 2018).



## **Spirituality, Holistic Practices and Implications for Desistance**

It has been argued that spirituality is a ‘multifaceted concept that is very personal and experiential’, and tends to be concerned with ‘any experience of transcendence of one’s former frame of reference that results in greater knowledge and love’ (Hall et al., 2011, p.207). Some evidence suggests that ‘third wave’, ascetic-spiritual practices such as yoga and meditation can help to nurture such transcendence and play a valuable part in fostering positive identity change among offenders (Howells et al., 2010; Parkes and Bilby 2010; Bilderdeck et al. 2013).

Particularly relevant to criminologists is the evidence that suggests that meditative practices have the potential to address psychosocial processes that are clearly related to recidivism. For example, research has highlighted that some practices have been found to be helpful in the control of anger that can often lead to violence, and in the reduction of substance dependency (Howells et al., 2010; Bakken et al., 2014). This has important implications, given the evidence that suggests that both drug addiction and violence are often carefully intertwined with gang membership (Densley, 2013; Deuchar, 2018). It has also been argued that engagement in holistic spiritual practices can increase positive psychological wellbeing (for review, see Deuchar, 2018). In turn, it has been argued that the resulting reduced levels of psychological distress could in some cases enhance offenders’ ability to engage in rehabilitation and wider treatments (*ibid*).

The empirical focus for this article is on exploring the impact of Sudarshan Kriya Yoga (SKY), which comprises a sequence of dynamic breathing techniques combined with particular forms of meditation and hatha yoga postures (Brown and Gerbarg, 2005). Its use is coordinated by the *Art of Living Foundation*, a nonprofit

service organisation founded in 1982 by the Indian spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (Deuchar, 2018). Qualitative research interviews conducted with staff and officials in maximum security prisons in India suggested that regular practice of SKY significantly reduced violent behaviour among inmates (Brown and Gerbarg 2005). Further, a pilot study of juvenile offenders and gang members convicted of violent crimes with deadly weapons in Los Angeles County found that those given SKY training for one week followed by 30 minutes of guided meditation and breathing exercises three nights per week showed ‘significant overall reduction’ in anxiety, depression and reactive behaviour including violence (Brown and Gerbarg 2005, p.714).

## **Methodology**

### **Context and Focus**

Denmark has a long history of motorcycle gang culture and organised forms of criminality, including drug dealing (Deuchar, 2018). However, in addition there is a recognised cultural openness in Denmark to drawing upon ascetic-spiritual practices in criminal justice policy and practice (*ibid*). Accordingly, empirical insights focused on the potential impact of such interventions on members of organised criminal gangs could prove beneficial to informing policy and practice within a shifting UK gang context.

The *Breath Smart* programme was founded in Denmark in 2000, with the specific goal of teaching participants to use SKY as a means of potentially supporting them to deal with challenging life circumstances (Deuchar, 2018). Its partner programme, *Prison Smart*, is focused specifically on supporting prison inmates to address the same issues. Both programmes draw upon a traditional model of SKY as per the teachings of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and promoted globally by the *Art of Living*

*Foundation*. In the *Prison Smart* programme, teachers primarily engage with predominantly male inmates (particularly gang members), introducing them to the yoga, breathing and meditation techniques on a one-to one basis and in small groups across an intensive five-day programme, while also encouraging them to reflect upon and discuss their physical, personal and emotional reactions to and experiences of the techniques. They then follow this up with top-up sessions while also encouraging inmates to practice on their own. The *Breath Smart* programme, which is delivered in the community, tends also to involve group participation.

## **Methods**

The use of life history methodology has the advantage of capturing social and cultural influences and creating space for respondents to recollect and articulate critical events, salient turning points and experiences (Atkinson, 1998). Accordingly, during intermittent visits to Denmark between 2016-2018, the author conducted life history interviews with a sample of 17 Danish men with a history of violent and wider gang-related criminal offending and who had recent experience of participating in the *Prison Smart* and (in some cases) *Breathe Smart* programme. Access to the participants was gained through the support of the Danish Prison and Probation Service (DPPS), as well as the coordinator of the *Art of Living Prison Programme* and *Breathe Smart* programme in Scandinavia. The criteria used to select interviewees was as follows: participants had to have had a history of gang membership, involvement in serious and prolonged criminal offending behaviour and some experience of participating in the *Prison Smart* programme (and, in some cases, the *Breathe Smart* programme). Further, they had to be willing, through a process of informed consent, to talk about their

experiences within the context of a 60-90 minute life history interview which would be recorded on an audio device.

Interviews were conducted either in prisons or (for those who had already been released from prison during the time the fieldwork was conducted) within the premises of the *Breathe Smart* organisation in Denmark. During the interviews, the researcher explored the participants' life experiences, the details of their offending backgrounds, their experiences of participating in the programme and the follow on practices, the perceived impact that the practices had had on them and their thoughts about the future. In addition to the empirical research conducted with the main sample of participants, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with three of the teachers of the breathing and meditation practice (for further details, see Deuchar, 2018).

### **Participant Details**

Of the 17 men who participated in life history interviews, 13 were white ethnic Danes while four were first generation immigrants descending from Macedonia, Lebanon, Uganda and Somalia. In terms of ages, while two of the men were in their 20s, seven were in their 30s and eight in their 40s. All had been members of gangs, and had convictions relating to their involvement in organised forms of criminality and violence. For these men, gangs were mostly defined as being associated with outlaw motorcycle clubs. However, some also alluded to gang culture association within the context of more localised street gang membership and/or drug dealing networks.

While four of the participants were inmates in either closed or open prisons at the time that the interviews were conducted, the remainder (n=13) had been released back into the community (albeit in some cases very recently). However, all of the participants had first begun to engage with the SKY practices and techniques while

inmates via the *Prison Smart* programme and, in the case of the majority of those who had now been released, had continued to practice in their own homes and/or in a group context with other participants within the *Breathe Smart* premises. In fact, of the 13 participants who were released from custodial sentences by the time the fieldwork took place, 11 were still practicing regularly. The length of time that these men had been practising SKY for varied – with one participant indicating he had been engaging in the practices for nine years, and others only for a number of weeks or months.

### **Analytic approach**

Transcription of the interviews was followed by a rigorous thematic analysis process, whereby the author immersed himself in the data and engaged in an inductive approach to open and axial coding to identify the most salient themes (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The broad themes that emerged from the total data set were *Early Disadvantage, Social Exclusion and Trauma; Re-asserting Masculinity through Gang Lifestyles; Turning Points; Anger Management and Emotional Release; Spiritual Engagement and Religiosity; and Psychological Wellbeing; Masculinity, Identity and Desistance Journeys*. In this paper, the focus is on the insights gleaned from the reforming gang members and programme participants (for wider insights from programme teachers, see Deuchar, 2018). In the following sections, the sub-themes relating to the broader insights are grouped under the following headings: *Gang Lifestyles, Turning Points, Spiritual Engagement and Religiosity; and Psychological Wellbeing, Masculinity and Desistance-related Attitudes*. To preserve the anonymity of the men, pseudonyms are used throughout.

### **Findings**

## **Gang Lifestyles, Turning Points, Spiritual Engagement and Religiosity**

All of the men admitted that they were initially attracted to motorcycle gang membership because of their desire to express masculinity and over-compensate for their early lack of positive male role models as well as to make ‘fast money’ from drug dealing and other forms of organised crime. However, they described reaching a point where they began to want to make a change and move away from gang-related criminality after they had become fathers, or simply because they had grown weary of the lifestyle (Decker et al., 2014). Against this backdrop, while they were still incarcerated for various gang-related crimes, the men had begun to reach out and engage with the *Prison Smart* programme. While some had been referred by social workers or psychologists, the majority of the men had self-referred to the programme because they had heard about it from other prison inmates. Often the men described the way in which fellow inmates and reforming gang members had told them that the practices ‘worked’, in terms of reducing anxiety and addressing symptoms of stress, depression and trauma. In particular, several talked about the way in which it was the men that they perceived to be ‘tough guys’, who often had shaved heads, tattoos and violent reputations, who inspired them to sign up for the programme – as Sebastian explained:

*There’s a guy called Dan ... they call him ... ‘big Dan’ ... he’s very respected, a lot of people know who he is ... and he’s done the courses ... so I knew that if a guy like that was able to get something from this, then I would too ... he’s definitely a really, really, really tough guy. (Sebastian)*

Given their hitherto narrow and deeply-entrenched views on masculinity, the men described their initial feelings of frustration when they first engaged with the holistic practices. For instance, several of the men described having a strong feeling of wanting to reject the mantra that forms part of the Sadarshan Kriya dynamic breathing exercises. These men explained that this was largely because they found that the voice of the spiritual leader, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, repetitively chanting a rhythmic Indian mantra on a tape recording used during practices initially caused them to feel restless and irritable, and they also regarded this as being associated with a type of ‘hippy’ subculture. Two participants also both admitted that they felt impatient and even aggressive throughout the entirety of the first few meditation practices because they were very unused to having to sit still for long periods and [when engaging in a group] found the sound of the other male participants’ breathing irritating.

However, many talked at length about the intense feelings of peace that they began to experience after persevering with the SKY techniques for some time. In some cases, this also included an experience of crying, releasing emotion and feeling remorse for the first time. Many felt that their experiences of engaging with the practices were deeply spiritual. In some cases, the men related this to their existing religious values. For example, Felix felt that engaging in the meditation and breathing exercises had deepened his Christian beliefs, leading him to embrace Jesus as a role model and to become a ‘man of God’:

*Jesus ... gives some pointers [on] how to live. I have tried to live the complete opposite, and I have tried to live the way that he recommends. I know what I like the most! The one thing brought me just nothing, emptiness, one big hole in*

*the ground ... and the other one has brought me freedom, happiness ... a lot of love in my life ... I have never been a man of God as I am today. (Felix)*

Further, Abbad had experienced a deep feeling of calmness that enabled him to become more disciplined with his Muslim faith, while Cumar had begun to become more committed to Islam and felt that his daily prayers had become deeper when conducted in combination with the meditation and breathing practices:

*So I think it's more easier to follow religion if you're calm [than] if you're not calm ... because I could not pray five times a day before ... it's a big thing for me to fast and to pray. And now I'm doing this. (Abbad)*

*Before I don't care ... [about] Islam ... [but now] if I only make 'Breathe Smart' I have it good, when I ... pray I have it super good ... because the practice [means] I can pray too, and if I do both I feel much better. (Cumar)*

Further, Damon believed that the breathing and meditation practices had enabled him to become more in touch with his soul, which in turn led to calmness and a greater ability to manage stress:

*I get more in contact with my soul, and not the needs that my body has ... I just feel everything is in balance ... and you feel calm ... I'm more prepared for anything, I feel I can manage everything. (Erik)*

Some academic authors (for instance, Hay and Nye, 1998) have defined spirituality in such a way that it connects with definitions of religious engagement in



terms of being synonymous with developing an awareness of and relationship with a 'higher power' such as God. However, a more holistic sense of spiritual development has been defined in terms of gaining a 'heightened awareness of oneself and others' (Nurden, 2010, p.122) and a means of 'getting in touch with the deeper parts of life' and growing in experience, understanding and response (Nurden, 2010, p.123). It was the latter form of spirituality that Damon (above) and the other men most commonly cited as being integral to the SKY practices they engaged with within the *Prison smart/Breathe Smart* programme, and that enabled them to get more in touch with innate, softer feelings associated with love and kindness for self and others. As the next section illustrates, it also enabled many of the men to gain an increased sense of psychological wellbeing and to deconstruct, problematize and re-define their deeply entrenched views on masculinity (Connell, 2005; Deuchar, 2018).

### **Psychological Wellbeing, Masculinity and Desistance-related Attitudes**

As they had begun to practice the techniques within the programme regularly and over a prolonged period, many of the men described the way in which they had stopped smoking cannabis or drinking large volumes of alcohol as a means of self-medicating against the symptoms of stress, anxiety or even depression. In some cases, they also described coming off of prescribed medication for mental health issues relating to their past, and replacing this with breathing and meditation:

*The evening was when I really smoked [cannabis] ... but then I finished the course, did it the whole way through and I could sleep. I hadn't slept for years at that point ... I didn't feel the same urge for smoking. (Felix)*

*I got a severe depression ... when I woke up in the morning ... I had to go down and buy two bottles of wine and drink them ... for the past two years I've been doing [breathing exercises] every morning, and then meditating at night also ... I feel very grounded, I'm not so anxious about what's gonna happen ... instead of identifying with all of my thoughts I can actually create a distance.*  
(William)

*These [anti-depressant] pills, they don't bring you any happiness ... they just make you like a walking zombie ... I said to my doctor, 'I don't want to do this anymore' ... I did a little more and a little more ... I used [meditation] every day ... healing myself.* (Damon)

The experience outlined by Damon was common to several of the men, who described replacing their reliance on anti-depressants with engagement in meditation. These men, and others like Felix and William who had experienced a quieting of the body and mind, evidently felt that the renewed sense of calmness and peace they gained from the practices had led to increased feelings of eudemonic wellbeing (Pandya, 2016).

Prior to the men's involvement in the programme, 'doing masculinity' was about earning money illegally, scanning for danger and being ready for violence. However, renewed feelings of calmness and changes in thinking patterns among the participants meant that masculinity was now seen as being synonymous with doing the right thing as fathers and family men (see also Deuchar, 2018):

*To be macho doesn't necessarily mean hitting other people or walking around with a knife ... it means taking care of your family, making sure nothing harms them.* (Sebastian)

*Before I looked up to the bikers ... now, what I can say, my greatest goal in life to be masculine is to be a great dad ... my new definition of real masculinity is 'the dad'.* (Felix)

However, there were some limitations in terms of the impact of the programme. For instance, two of the men (both of whom were in their thirties when they were interviewed) appeared to have particularly strongly-held machismo views. Specifically, Jamaal admitted to having been highly motivated towards living the 'fast' lifestyle associated with drug dealing during his youth, and enjoyed the feeling associated with other men 'looking up' to him and respecting him because of his reputation for violence; further, Alfred admitted to having been a bodybuilder and steroid user, and using his muscular physique and aggressive tattoos to generate an image of fearlessness towards other men. After attempting to engage with 'Breathe Smart', both participants indicated that the deeply entrenched views about 'hyper' masculinity that they still held and that had been promoted and reinforced for so long within the context of their gangs led them ultimately to reject the breathing and meditation practices and exit the programme. On both occasions, this was largely due to the reactions they received from other prisoners and/or fellow gang associates as well as their own seemingly unshakeable hegemonic perceptions that rejected perceived subordinated forms of masculinity such as homosexuality (Connell, 2005):

*I started talking to other prisoners ... they laughed ... didn't want to know anything about it ... we ['Breathe Smart' teachers and I] don't have any contact anymore. (Jamaal)*

*It doesn't make you feel ... like a man ... it feels kind of gay ... it's very difficult for me to say to some of the guys, they laugh at me when I say, 'I did this class in breathing and yoga. (Alfred)*

The other men in the sample were still actively engaging with the programme and its teachers during the time of the fieldwork. Several were still in prison while interviews were being conducted, while others who were now released admitted that they were still tempted or occasionally had pressure put upon them by former associates to return to the gang lifestyle. However, their comments often indicated that the SKY practices had helped them to re-position themselves as 'reformed' or 'reforming' offenders with a sense of moral agency, remorse and a greater commitment to change and take their family responsibilities seriously:

*I was an evil person ... it's a sick man who's doing that shit, you know? ... I was a very, very evil guy ... but then I start this [programme] and I start feeling some things, start feeling some guilt. (Marcos)*

*I always look at my son now and ... every time there's something I look at him and I will do the same when I come out [of prison] ... he needs me and that's what's going to keep me outside ... I'm not selfish anymore ... I feel calmer, happier. (Mario)*

*I get a lot of opportunities but I say 'no' ... now I say to people 100 per cent 'no.' I am very strong now ... one million per cent because of this course.*

(Omar)

Accordingly, the majority of the men appeared to become more willing to perform broader versions of masculinity than those that had characterised their previous periods as gang members. For instance, in addition to Sebastian, Felix and Mario, others also indicated that had begun to associate the expression of masculinity with 'giving back' by showing compassion and love to others around them (see also Deuchar, 2018):

*I want to ... be a good man for my wife and a good son for my parents and a good brother for my brothers and sisters, and good friend and ... just do the right thing.* (Cumar)

*I'm more mentally set on the outside world now ... I have my kids and my wife ... and I [have] my focus there ... I think I rest more on myself than I did [before].* (Oscar)

The men's emerging redemption scripts were characterised by a discarding of 'old selves', a process of 'rebiographing' (Johnson and Larson, 2003, p.27), a strong desire to 'give back', 'make good' and take control over their own futures (Maruna, 2001, p.87).

### **Concluding Discussion**

The insights from the empirical data confirm wider research evidence that

suggests that desistance-related attitudes often emerge as a result of an interplay between ‘push and pull’ factors (Pyrooz and Decker, 2011, p.420) and narrative reconstructions of selves and identities (Giordano et al., 2008). Trigger events for the male participants included becoming parents, experiencing intense psychological and mental health issues, or simply becoming weary of the gang lifestyle. Participating in the SKY practices was initially challenging for most, and for a small minority of the men their entrenched hegemonic views on masculinity and susceptibility to ‘hyper’ masculine influences led to a public distancing from the programme. However, for the majority of the men their perseverance in consistently using the techniques appeared to enable them to begin to problematize deeply engrained attitudes and values, perform broader versions of masculinity and open up to and discuss their emotions and feelings (Deuchar, 2018).

In three cases (Abbad and Cumar who were practicing Muslims and Felix who was Christian), the men believed that their engagement in the practices had strengthened the process of faith development, attachment to and engagement with religious doctrine and practices (Stansfield et al., 2018). In such cases, ritualistic engagement with prayer, worship, fasting, the experience of surrendering to a higher power or becoming guided by the teachings of a religious role model brought about a sense of self-discipline, selflessness, peace and fulfilment. These insights relate to functionalist perspectives that link religious engagement to the emergence of conformity to established rules, practices, beliefs and boundaries, and a strong foundation for moral behaviour (Hirschi and Stark, 1969; Clear and Sumter, 2002; Jensen and Gibbons, 2002; Tanyi, 2006; Giordano et al, 2008). More commonly, the men’s evolving self-narratives appeared to suggest an emerging intrinsic capacity for ‘self-transcendence’ unrelated to religious doctrine, practices and beliefs (Benson et al.,

2003, p.205). These men's holistic spiritual engagement was leading them to heightened inner-awareness, an embracing of softer feelings and emotions, a growing sense of peace and wellbeing, a concern with relationships to others and an emergence of redemption scripts (Maruna, 2001). In turn, this was giving them a stronger determination to desist from gang membership and violent crime. Although it was beyond the capacity of this research to be able to explore the longitudinal impact of participation in SKY in terms of criminal desistance, in their self-narratives many of the men expressed feelings of remorse for previous criminal lifestyles but also self-forgiveness and a strong commitment towards non-criminal lifestyles in the future.

The empirical insights lend some support to previous results from clinical trials that suggest that SKY can help to improve emotional processing, and support participants in managing stress, anxiety and depression (Brown and Gerbarg, 2005). Additionally, the findings suggest that most of the men were literally beginning to discard 'old selves' and to adopt new masculine identities. Thus, within their personal narratives they were beginning to focus on values such as commitment and loyalty to family roles and – most importantly – desisting from crime (Maruna, 2001; Johnson and Larson, 2003).

### **Implications for the UK**

Across the UK, there has been an increased recognition of the importance of improving mental health and wellbeing among men in custody, and the need to engage them in 'purposeful activity' as a means of increasing the focus on rehabilitation and preventing reoffending (Scottish Prison Service, 2014). However, in England and Wales a renewed commitment to enacting a revolution in rehabilitation (Grayling,

2012; Ministry of Justice, 2013) has not transferred into reality, with evidence suggesting that - in male prisons – inmates continue to spend long periods of time locked up in their cells (HMIP, 2015). In Scotland, it has also been found that ‘purposeful activity’ is often too narrowly focused on education programmes, vocational training and work placements internal and external to prisons (Scottish Prison Service, 2014).

There has also been an emerging policy focus in the UK (and particularly in Scotland) on the need to break down patriarchal gender roles. In particular, there is a recognised need to challenge the so-called culture of ‘toxic masculinity’ that reinforces an expectation that men should engage in aggressive, violent and dangerous behaviour and also hide and suppress their emotions (Scottish Government, 2018). However, recent evidence suggests that a significant number of young men across the UK are still influenced by damaging male stereotypes, including the perception that they should avoid expressing emotion, should never ask for emotional support and always display hyper-masculine behaviour (Working With Men, 2018).

Policy-led practitioner responses to the need to tackle mental health and entrenched gender perceptions have thus far largely focused on psychological and psychosocial treatments such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). However, these are costly, and often found to be ‘inaccessible, stigmatizing and undesirable because of their time-consuming and emotionally demanding nature’ (Bilderdeck et al., 2013, p.1443). The use of ascetic-spiritual interventions like SKY may offer a more ‘socially acceptable’ alternative for some men (*ibid*). This is a particularly salient insight in relation to gang members and gang criminality, given the ‘exaggerated’ (Baird, 2012, p.33) forms of *machismo* that gang affiliation often endorses and promotes among men and the challenges inherent in encouraging them to begin to internalise cognitive scripts



and confront and reconceptualise difficult, intrusive thoughts and emotions (Rappaport, 2004). However, as the experiences of two of the men in the sample referred to in his paper suggests, cognisance needs to be given to the fact that some male gang members may hold such deeply-entrenched views on hegemonic masculinity that they may not always be susceptible to these interventions (Connell, 2005).

That said, given that the majority of the empirical insights reported on in this paper suggest that engaging in these practices enabled the sampled men to become more willing and able to perform broader versions of masculinity, it is evident that such interventions may also hold the potential to support the desistance efforts of broader groups of male offenders beyond gang-related contexts (for further discussion, see Deuchar, 2018). Further, the data suggest that SKY can be used as a means of not only supporting the emergence of flexible thinking around the conceptualisation and performance of masculinity, but also the emergence of intense feelings of wellbeing. Given this, it may be the case that such interventions could be applicable to key areas outwith the criminal justice system. For instance, introducing the practices in schools, social work and social care contexts as well as youth work and outreach projects as part of early intervention initiatives would place an emphasis on promoting psychological wellbeing, as well as violence and crime prevention, among children and young people.

However, a limitation of the research was its inability to identify the specific elements of the SKY practices (such as yoga postures, rhythmic breathing techniques or meditation) that gave rise to the most salient benefits described by the participants, or indeed whether referral to the programme via other inmates or professional agencies led to the most positive impact. In addition, although two examples of men exiting the programme arose, the sample was limited in terms of yielding further insights into the reasons why some men may not continue to engage with these types of practices in the

longer term. In addition, it was unclear whether the social and emotional support from teachers and complementary use of reflective dialogue during sessions and/or the social effects of practicing SKY as part of a group both in prison and post-release may also have contributed towards the described impacts among many of the men in terms of enhanced mood states and masculine identity reconstruction (see also Bilderbeck *et al.*, 2013).

Clearly, additional research with wider samples of convicted gang members that involve a fine-grain analysis of these individual factors is required as a means of further enhancing the applicability of the evidence-base.

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